



CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

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MEMORANDUM

Mexico: New Activism in Central America

Anticipating further moves to the left in Central America, Mexico has embarked on a new, more active regional policy--underscored by political and economic initiatives--designed to enhance the influence of the Lopez Portillo government. Although initial efforts focusing on Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala appear to have been poorly organized, they may be part of a broader, evolving strategy for the entire Caribbean Basin.* [redacted]

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President Lopez Portillo is the driving force behind the new initiatives. With two and one half years remaining in his term, the President is no longer so preoccupied with domestic problems and is intent on enhancing his own image in the foreign policy sphere. Mexico's growing oil wealth--and the leverage it provides--is facilitating his efforts. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Latin America Division of the Office of Political Analysis. It was requested by the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. Information in this memorandum includes all reports received through 26 March. It was coordinated with the Clandestine Service. Questions and comments may be addressed to Chief, Latin America Division [redacted]

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Mexican motives are guided by traditional foreign policy tenets--such as independence from the United States and support for revolution or change in Latin America--as well as a perceived need to coopt the democratic left. Mexican leaders also are worried about growing Cuban--and ultimately Soviet--influence along their country's southern border. This concern, however, does not portend greater cooperation with the United States. Indeed, Mexico's fundamental desire to chart its own course, its narrower perception of the Cuban/Soviet threat, and its long-standing willingness to curry favor with leftist movements implies widening policy differences with the US.

Mexican policy toward the region now primarily involves efforts to provide economic and political support to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, to maintain a cool posture toward the governing junta in El Salvador, and to influence the rightwing Guatemalan regime to broaden its base of support.

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At Lopez Portillo's direction, the PRI has formed the Conference of Latin American Political Parties--headed by PRI President Gustavo Carvajal--to cultivate progressive groups in the region.

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Attitude and Initiatives

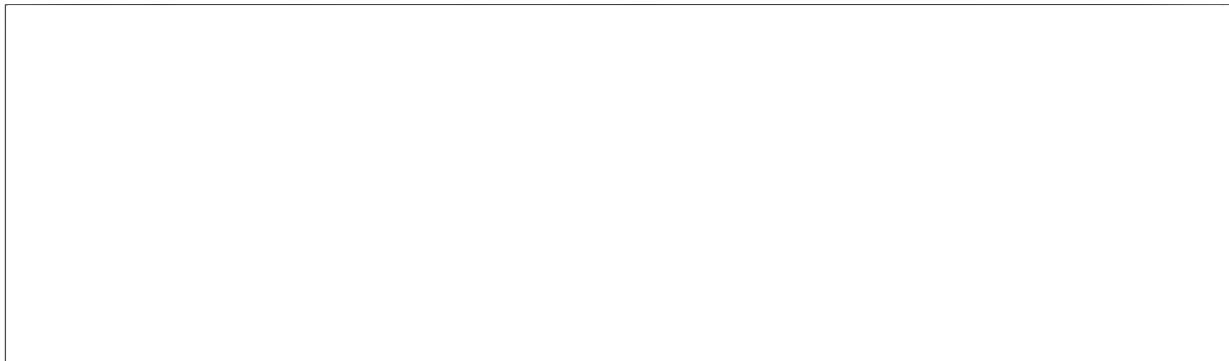
Lopez Portillo publicly committed himself to an expanded Mexican role in Central America in a speech delivered in Managua on 24 January. The Nicaraguans, he explained, could be the "protagonists" of a new Latin American future--a "third turning point"--that avoids past shortcomings of both the Mexican and Cuban revolutions. He encouraged the Sandinistas to "invent their own revolution" and to keep it free of internal and external "demons of exploitation and ignorance." During a later press conference, Lopez Portillo noted that Nicaragua offers a revolutionary alternative for Latin America--a fundamental reason for Mexican support.

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Lopez Portillo's determination to gain influence in Managua is underscored by his assertion that Mexican aid to the Sandinistas will be "unconditional"--not tied to ideological or political considerations. Mexico has promised to supply about half of Managua's petroleum needs--7,500 barrels of oil daily--reportedly at reduced prices starting in April. Mexico has sent technicians to help in energy, fishing, education, mining, telecommunications, and public administration fields. In addition it has signed several agreements to provide technical, cultural, agricultural, and scientific assistance. [redacted]

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Believing that the radical left will continue to gain strength in El Salvador, Mexico will maintain contact with the revolutionaries and try to influence them. [redacted]

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[redacted] We have no evidence of concrete Mexican aid to Salvadoran radicals, but they have access to Mexican media and are permitted to demonstrate in Mexico City. PRI President Carvajal has denounced the repression by security forces in El Salvador, and Lopez Portillo's recent description of Central American governments as "repressive regimes" is another step in distancing himself from the junta.

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In Guatemala, Lopez Portillo is pursuing a two-pronged strategy designed to pressure the Lucas regime to undertake liberal reforms and to control both leftist and rightist terrorism. He has delayed his planned visit there and is

holding in abeyance promised economic aid, including deliveries of oil under favorable credit terms. Nonetheless, Mexico does not want to alienate the Guatemalan leaders and will attempt to avoid pushing the Lucas regime further into a siege mentality. Senior Mexican military officers reportedly are becoming increasingly concerned that Guatemalan guerrillas could pose an internal security threat to Mexico's southern states, the scene of considerable social and economic instability. (S NF NC)

Motives

Mexico has several motives for expanding its ties with the region's emerging revolutionary forces:

--Necessity for Revolutionary Change. For decades, Mexican governments have supported in principle the need for revolutionary change in Latin America. The Mexicans believe that historical forces make inevitable sweeping socioeconomic restructuring in the northern Central American countries. Lopez Portillo and other leaders believe, therefore, that Mexico must move into closer association with progressive and revolutionary groups. [redacted]

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--Independence of the US. A hallmark of Mexican foreign policy is the desire to project an image at home and abroad of a progressive, sovereign state, free of US control, and able to plot an independent course in global and regional affairs. By pursuing policies in Central America that diverge from or even conflict with those of the US, Mexican nationalists can conspicuously assert their autonomy in foreign affairs. [redacted]

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--Domestic Political. The assuaging, if not disarming, of the Mexican left is an important element in the Mexican political process--an important reason for the break in relations with Somoza's Nicaragua. [redacted]

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--Alternatives to Cuban Influence. Mexican and Cuban views on the future political development of the region are in some ways compatible, and therefore, a dilemma for Lopez Portillo. Although Mexico would like to see progressive governments emerge, it does not want them to be aligned exclusively with Havana or to emulate Cuban political and economic models. The Mexican President wants to offer leftist revolutionaries an alternative to Cuban and Soviet support, but he realizes the direct competition with the Castro regime may damage a relationship that serves Mexico's international and domestic needs. [redacted]

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Mexican views of Cuban support for leftist insurgents in Central America differ dramatically from Washington's, and Mexico is therefore unlikely to be swayed by arguments that Cuba is a destabilizing presence in the region. [redacted]

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Despite this seeming tolerance for Cuba's role in the area, many Mexican leaders--particularly those in the security forces--are concerned about the potential emergence of Marxist, pro-Cuban governments on Mexico's southern flank. This area is poorly defended, and, because of long-standing socioeconomic problems, would be vulnerable to infiltration by radical leftists. [redacted]

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Mexico and the US

Mexico's views are more narrowly focused and are based on different concerns than those of the US; therefore, considerable potential for bilateral discord exists--particularly if radical influence continues to increase in Nicaragua and El Salvador. On the other hand, Mexico's policy toward Guatemala--tempered by geographical proximity and security concerns--is more compatible with Washington's. Although Mexico privately expresses distaste for the right-wing military government, it does not want leftist forces to gain control there. A serious radical threat to the Lucas administration would prompt Mexico to reexamine its Guatemalan policies. [redacted]

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